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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IS](#) [GOI](#) [INTERNAL](#)

SUBJECT: ZEVULUN ORLEV, MINISTER OF LABOR AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Classified By: Political Counselor Norman Olsen for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

1. (C) Zevulun Orlev, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, is a moderate member of the rightist National Religious Party (NRP). He has primarily focused on domestic affairs and internal NRP machinations. Orlev has endeavored to move the NRP into a moderate position in order to prove that it is an acceptable coalition partner to whichever government is in power. If, however, PM Sharon follows through with his unilateral Gaza disengagement plan, Orlev may have difficulty preventing the NRP from leaving the government coalition in protest over the plan. Orlev has expressed strong ideas on the route of the Separation Fence -- wanting to keep the Ariel settlement on the western side of the Fence -- and favors expelling Arafat. He speaks out and acts against the secular Shinui party's attempts to separate religion from government, noting that such separation would "damage the Jewish character of the state..." Orlev is an effective and prolific legislator; in the 15th Knesset he sponsored 19 bills that were passed into law, and made the most speeches on the Knesset floor. End Summary.

Political Career

2. (C) Zevulun Orlev, Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, began his Knesset career in 1999. He has spent his time in the Knesset focused on domestic affairs, rather than on NRP's bread and butter issues of the peace process and settlements. During the 15th Knesset, he served on several committees, including a stint as chairman of the Education and Culture Committee, and as a member of the special committee for school dropout rates. He won an award for being the "Best Legislator of the 15th Knesset" in November 2001 by sponsoring 19 bills into law, and making the most speeches in the Knesset. Prior to his Knesset career, he served as director general in three ministries, Religious Affairs, Education, and Culture.

Party Politics

3. (C) Orlev has been working to moderate NRP's image. This is exemplified by the NRP for the first time sending a woman, Gila Finkelstein, to the Knesset in the last elections. Recently Orlev has also been advocating a "wait and see" position on NRP withdrawal from the government over Sharon's disengagement plan. The goal of Orlev and the NRP leadership is to remain in the center-right of the political spectrum, enabling them to join any coalition in power and snap up key ministries for the party. In 2002, Orlev, and NRP colleagues Shaul Yahalom and Yitzhak Levy attempted to regain lost Knesset seats by placing Effie Eitam, a popular right-wing firebrand and retired IDF general, into the position of party chairman for the prime ministerial elections. Their strategy proved unsuccessful when Sharon won the election by a clear majority. Orlev and others in the NRP's central committee have been maneuvering to replace Eitam with Orlev, leaving Yahalom to move into the number two slot. Eitam has been trying to reduce Orlev's influence, but has been largely unsuccessful. In the past, NRP's seats were needed to form a coalition. In the 2003 elections, Sharon's strong showing meant that the NRP was not needed, but the party was welcomed into the coalition.

4. (C) Sharon's unilateral Gaza disengagement plan threatens the interests of NRP's core constituency, the settlers. Orlev, unlike the majority of NRP members, nonetheless opposes the party leaving the government coalition if the plan is brought to the Knesset. In a recent interview with a right-wing TV station, Arutz 7, Orlev said he would support withdrawing from the coalition only if he is convinced that the NRP has absolutely no influence on coalition decisions regarding any withdrawal. Orlev noted that Sharon has not brought the issue to the Cabinet, that he has no majority because of the right-wing faction, and that as long as this is the case, Sharon will not bring the matter to a Knesset vote.

Anti-Shinui

15. (C) The entry of the secular Shinui party into the government after the last election has led Orlev to speak out against that party's attempted reforms. When the Interior Ministry, led by Shinui MK Avraham Poraz, declined to enforce laws against public display of leavened foods during Passover last year, Orlev said that it was "damaging the Jewish character of the state and the delicate social fabric of Israeli society." He also spoke out against suspending fines on businesses that violate the law by employing Jews on the Sabbath. He told Ha'aretz in March 2003 that "suspending the (Sabbath) inspector's work was a blatant violation of the status quo on religion-and-state issues." Orlev also voted against a proposal by Interior Minister Poraz that would allow non-Israeli citizens who had served in the IDF for 18 months to apply for citizenship, arguing that this proposal would dilute Israel's Jewish identity.

Views on Arafat and the Separation Fence

16. (C) In response to the January 28 suicide bomb attack in Jerusalem, Orlev urged the PM to "implement the security cabinet's decision to exile Arafat without delay." Orlev stated that if Arafat were not expelled it would leave the door open to other attacks. This past fall, during the debate over the route of the separation fence, six ministers, including Orlev, objected to the decision to route the fence west of Ariel, as well as other settlements deep into West Bank territory. At the time Orlev told Arutz-7 television that Israel "was not an American colony and that our first priority is to protect our citizens in Ariel and everywhere else." He was also quoted saying that Israelis must tell Americans, "that they must not interfere in our defense considerations."

Personal Details

17. (C) Zevulun Orlev was born in Palestine in 1945; he is married, with four children, and lives in Jerusalem. Orlev began his working career as a teacher. He has a degree in Humanities and Social Sciences from Hebrew University and a degree in teaching from Moreshet Yaakov College. He speaks some English.

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